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In Memoriam

Thomas J. Heldt, M.D. 1883-1972

Dr. Thomas J. Heldt, physician-in-charge of the Division of Neuropsychiatry at Henry Ford Hospital from 1923 until his retirement to consultant in 1952, died at age 89 on August 21, 1972.

He was born in Buckeye, Iowa, on August 8, 1883. He developed an early interest in medicine while helping the local family doctor on his rounds. However, his formal education after high school was delayed by the need to work — in lumber camps, sawmills, and on farms — before entering the University of Missouri in 1905. There he secured the bachelor of arts and master of arts degrees, supported financially by his own endeavors and by a scholarship. He entered medical school in 1912, continuing his own support as an instructor in anatomy. Because his interest then centered on psychiatry, he transferred in 1914 to Johns Hopkins University to study with Dr. Adolf Meyer, then the outstanding American teacher of psychiatry. Graduating in medicine from Johns Hopkins in 1916, his internship was primarily in psychiatric facilities: Ward's Island, New York, Manhattan State Hospital and Psychiatric Institute, and the Department of Psychopathology of Cornell Medical College.

Dr. Heldt's first practice of psychiatry was as a major in the Medical Corps of the U. S. Army, from June, 1917, until July, 1919, in World War I. He was division psychiatrist for the 81st Army Division, which had active combat experience in the Metz-Verdun drive. After the War, he served with the U. S. Public

Health Service, from 1919 to 1923, as clinical director of the hospital at Waukesha, Wisconsin. He established several USPHS Child Guidance Clinics.

When Dr. Heldt came to the Henry Ford Hospital in 1923, he was 40 years of age, a seasoned, mature, and practical neuropsychiatrist. Reared to work with his hands with common people, educated through his own efforts at fine institutions, and experienced in bringing psychiatric insights to patients *not* confined in mental hospitals, he was the ideal man to introduce psychiatry into the general hospital setting. Because this was then a new idea, there was prejudice to overcome. Could a psychiatrist cooperate and communicate effectively with the internist, the surgeon, the pathologist? Without locked doors, could the psychotic patient be treated with safety to all concerned? Could the nervous and emotional patient be treated psychologically, beyond tonics and sedatives? Fifty years ago, no one could really answer those questions; but Dr. Heldt's unit at the Ford Hospital paved the way to today's enthusiastic affirmatives. This has been his outstanding life's work.

His success in this great professional achievement was insured by his specific personal attributes. Because of his thorough knowledge of anatomy, physiology, and general medicine, his medical colleagues knew he understood their clinical problems. In turn, he was able, with simple language, to get them to understand the human side of their patients. With his own patients, he would use his large

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hands expressively, often touching the patient, if only to take the blood pressure or to use the ophthalmoscope. Such a "laying-on-of-hands" is an ancient symbol by which the strength and understanding of the physician seems to flow into the patient. They felt his gentleness, but also his firmness and his sureness; and they knew they could rely on his fierce protectiveness if outside interference in his treatment plan made that necessary. Thus he brought together medicine and psychiatry, and he brought psychiatry out of the mental hospital.

Of his many honors and recognitions, I will mention only a few. He was president of the Michigan Society of Neuropsychiatry in 1925 and again in 1946, and president of the Central Neuropsychiatric Association in 1951. He contributed regularly to medical journals, not only on the subject of psychiatry in the general hospital, but also on neurology and on particular psychiatric observations. His hobby was big game hunting, not only to

secure the usual hunter's trophy, but also to further scientific research. He would take out the animal's brain (no easy task in the wilds) and send it to the University of Michigan for studies in comparative anatomy.

Dr. Heldt enjoyed 46 years with his wife Jennie, before her death in 1955. The major tragedy was the death, in early adult life, of their only daughter, Nellie. He survived by three sons, Thomas F. Heldt of Albuquerque, New Mexico, Robert F. Heldt of Pleasant Ridge, Michigan, and Dr. Richard F. Heldt of Dearborn, Michigan. There is a surviving sister, Hulda, of Sioux City, Iowa; also, six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. To these relatives, the staff of the Henry Ford Hospital expresses its sympathy. Those of us who had the privilege to work directly with him and to learn from him share, particularly, with his many patients some of his family's deep sense of personal loss.

—Eugene J. Alexander, M.D.